

BOOK CATALOG



Borders and Conflicts: Hungarian Borders
During the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis
Through Digital Canvases

Guita G. Hourani

I N T R O D U C T I O N

INTRODUCTION

The genesis of this book catalog stems from the inspiration gathered during my study trip to Hungary in March 2023. I had the privilege of being part of a multinational research team led by Professor Osamu Ieda from Waseda University in Tokyo, Japan. Our team was hosted by Professor Norbert Pap from the University of Pécs, Hungary, and supported by the recommendation of Professor Hidemitsu Kuroki from Tokyo University of Foreign Studies in Tokyo, Japan, and Director of the Japan Center for Middle Eastern Studies (JaCMES), Beirut, Lebanon.



The cover features the digital painting "Borders and Conflict-II (2023) by Guita Hourani.

B O R D E R S

Throughout our journey, we explored various border regions, with a particular focus on Hungary's border areas. Our itinerary led us to sites where refugees crossed and places where they sought refuge, offering insights into their experiences and the challenges they faced, all against the backdrop of Russia's aggression towards Ukraine one year earlier.



The cover features the digital painting "Borders and Conflict-III" (2023) by Guita Hourani.



The cover features the digital painting "Borders and Conflict-IV" (2023) by Guita Hourani.

The catalog showcases artworks meticulously crafted by myself using digital canvases. While always drawn to artistic expression, I initially hesitated to share my creations publicly. However, the advent of technology has offered a transformative avenue, allowing me to convey emotions and amplify my creative pursuits more effectively. This medium has provided a platform to translate imagination into tangible forms of expression, facilitating the immediate conversion of emotions and imagery into artworks that capture the essence of the moment.

The narratives and artworks presented in this catalog were conceived upon my return to Lebanon from Hungary. It required considerable time and introspection to muster the courage to unveil them to the public, not merely as artworks but as emotions encapsulating both time and space.

Hungary and Ukraine share a border spanning 135 kilometers. This relatively narrow stretch of land has emerged as the primary gateway into Hungary for Ukrainians seeking refuge from the turmoil wrought by Russia's invasion of their homeland. In the wake of this crisis, Hungary committed to maintaining open borders for Ukrainian refugees.

As of December 2022, data from the Hungarian Border Police indicated a staggering 3.9 million recorded crossings, with two million originating directly from Ukraine and 1.9 million from the Romanian border. Remarkably, Hungary accounted for the second-highest number of entries, trailing only behind Poland in its reception of displaced individuals fleeing the conflict.



Digital painting "Borders and Conflict-I" (2023) by Guita Hourani.

ZÁHONY



Digital painting "Borders and Conflict-V" (2023) by Guita Hourani.

ORDER CROSSINGS: A JOURNEY THROUGH ZÁHONY, HUNGARY

Nestled within the Hungarian landscape lies the Záhony Border, a significant juncture in the nation's border infrastructure. Alongside Záhony, several other crossings, such as Lónya, Barabás, Beregsurány, and Tiszabecs, serve as vital conduits connecting Hungary to Ukraine. Since its accession to the European Union in 2004, Hungary has made a steadfast commitment to maintaining open borders for Ukrainian refugees.

Záhony emerged as a vital conduit through which thousands sought refuge, positioning itself as a focal point for the humanitarian endeavors orchestrated by the Hungarian Reformed Church Aid.

Perched upon the platform of Záhony's train station, a mere two kilometers from the Ukrainian border, I found myself immersed in contemplation, eagerly awaiting the next train ferrying forcibly displaced individuals.

As the afternoon sun began its descent, casting a solemn hue across the sky, I beheld the Ukrainian horizon with a mixture of anticipation and trepidation. The canvas of grey-blue above mirrored the sombre mood, while the tangerine streaks on the horizon whispered of optimism, promising a dawn of renewed hope amidst the darkness.

Standing there, I felt an eerie detachment, as if observing the scene from outside my body, overwhelmed by a profound sense of anguish. Questions flooded my mind relentlessly: What must these refugees be feeling? How many of them share my age, and my experiences of displacement? Who have they left behind, and who have they lost in the tumult of fleeing their homes? I could only fathom the depths of emptiness and disorientation engulfing their souls.

In that moment, buried memories of my own forced displacement, etched some forty-eight years prior, surged forth, unleashing a torrent of repressed emotions. Vivid images cascaded through my mind, each one a haunting reminder of the shivers, the tears, and the suffocating sense of panic that accompanied that fateful day: November 11, 1975.



Digital painting "Borders and Conflict-VI" (2023) by Guita Hourani.



Digital painting "Borders and Conflict-VII" (2023) by Guita Hourani.

On that harrowing night, as darkness blanketed our village, navigating the treacherous paths through unmarked borders became not merely a challenge but a matter of life and death.

For eight interminable months, we had endured the relentless onslaught of violence and bloodshed, perpetrated against us Christians by Syrian-controlled Palestinian factions and leftist parties. Yet, it was on that fateful night that the crescendo of terror reached its peak. As-Sa'iqa, the Palestinian Ba'athist political and military faction under Syrian control, unleashed a vicious armed assault upon our village, plunging us into a nightmarish abyss from which escape seemed all but impossible.

In the heart of chaos—amidst the piercing cries of women and the relentless symphony of rockets and bullets—my family's council made the agonizing decision to evacuate the women, children, and elderly to the sanctuary of a



Digital painting "Borders and Conflict-VIII" (2023) by Guita Hourani.

neighboring village, still untouched by the horrors that besieged our own. Amidst the cover of night, a handful of men from my family assumed the role of guardians, guiding us through perilous terrain as we navigated the labyrinthine paths from one neighbourhood to the next.

We trudged onward, our footsteps muffled by the cacophony of conflict, bearing the weight of children, assisting the frail and injured, and guiding the vulnerable through the treacherous landscape of mud and shattered glass. Scaling walls, darting through narrow alleys, we pressed forward until we reached the boundary of the next village, where awaiting vehicles stood poised to ferry us to safety.

At the designated rendezvous point, my uncle Hanna (John), a figure of unwavering courage and resolve, flung open the trunk of his white Mercedes,

transforming it into a makeshift refuge for us children. With meticulous care, he packed us inside, squeezing in as many as possible, both within the confines of the trunk and perched upon the car's hood. With steely determination, he piloted us to Chtoura, a nearby haven, shuttling tirelessly back and forth until every last soul from our beleaguered borough found sanctuary.

Upon reaching Chtoura, chaos enveloped us—the air filled with the deafening cacophony of gunfire and explosions, drowning out the



Digital painting "Borders and Conflict-IX" (2023) by Guita Hourani.

As the floodgates of suppressed memories burst open, inundating my senses with waves of raw emotion, I felt myself engulfed in a dizzying whirlwind of fear and despair. Sensing the encroaching specter of faintness, I hastened indoors, seeking solace within the sanctuary of shelter.

Rejoining my colleagues, I found them stationed where I had left them moments ago, engrossed in conversations with representatives from the UNHCR, the IOM, and the Hungarian Reformed Church Aid (HRCA), all diligently dedicated to aiding the refugees. Some were busy capturing images of informational pamphlets and announcements, while others idly observed the arrival timetable displayed above the main gate.

the screams and cries of the terrified populace. Choked by fear and confusion, my family sought refuge in a modest hotel near the police station. After securing us in the safety of our room, they gathered in the parlor to confer with a resident of the hotel, a prominent figure from the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), about the unfolding events.

As my sister and I grappled with the unfolding tragedy, we clandestinely slipped out from the window of our room, leaving behind our younger brothers. It was then that we stumbled upon the horrifying aftermath of a massacre near St. Elias Church borough—a scene of unimaginable loss that claimed the lives of a schoolmate of ours, Yolla, who had been preparing to join her brothers in the US, along with four of her cousins. Additionally, we learned of the murder of a cherished family friend, Michel, whose melodies on the oud or lute once filled our gatherings with joy. The tragic fate of others from various boroughs in our village further highlighted the



Digital painting "Borders and Conflict-X" (2023) by Guita Hourani.

brutality of the invaders.

Returning to our room as dawn broke, my own injuries became painfully apparent. Huddled on the floor, silently swallowing my pain, consumed by cold and terror, I swung between sleeplessness and wakefulness. Suddenly, I was jolted by the piercing scream of my mother. Rushing to the window alongside my sister, we bore witness to the heart-wrenching sight of the wife of my father's first cousin, cradling the lifeless body of her 13-year-old daughter, blood-staining her clothes. The sunrise cast an eerie glow upon them, intensifying the surreal horror of the moment. As Giselle's mother pleaded desperately to be taken to a hospital in Beirut to save her daughter, Giselle had become another tragic casualty of that fateful night.

As the floodgates of suppressed memories burst open, inundating my senses with waves of raw emotion, I was reduced to pieces—tearing up, gasping for air, and trembling like a leaf. I felt myself engulfed in a dizzying whirlwind of fear

and despair. Sensing faintness creeping in, I hurried indoors, seeking solace within the sanctuary of the station.

Re-joining my colleagues, I found them stationed where I had left them moments ago, engrossed in conversations with representatives from the UNHCR, the IOM, and the Hungarian Reformed Church Aid (HRCA), all diligently dedicated to aiding the refugees. Some were busy capturing images of informational pamphlets and announcements, while others idly observed the arrival timetable above the main gate.



Digital painting "Borders and Conflict-XI" (2023) by Guita Hourani.

HRCA, a distinguished humanitarian aid organization, stands as the vanguard of relief efforts, having established an emergency response center at the Záhony train station and various other border locations. As trains pull into the station, a cadre of dedicated HRCA employees and volunteers stands ready to extend a helping hand to Ukrainian refugees. Their efforts encompass the distribution of essential provisions such as food, water, diapers, clothing, and hygiene kits, along with the provision of crucial information, assistance with accommodations, and the like.



Digital painting "Borders and Conflict-XII" (2023) by Guita Hourani.

Upon their arrival in Záhony, the refugees find themselves enveloped in a network of care and support orchestrated by the HRCA. They are provided with second-class free tickets to Budapest, where sister organizations and other NGOs await to aid them in settling and navigating their next steps. In Hungary, a Temporary Protection Status (TPS) is readily accessible to facilitate their stay and ensure access to essential services.



Upon their arrival in Záhony, the refugees find themselves enveloped in a network of care and support orchestrated by the HRCA. They are provided with second-class free tickets to Budapest, where sister organizations and other NGOs await to aid them in settling and navigating their next steps. In Hungary, a Temporary Protection Status (TPS) is readily accessible to facilitate their stay and ensure access to essential services.

Digital painting "Borders and Conflict-XII" (2023) by Guita Hourani.



The HRCA's commitment to providing holistic support extends beyond the immediate necessities. Volunteers and staff engage with the refugees, offering not just material aid but emotional support as well. The playrooms and makeshift classrooms serve as vital spaces for children to find some semblance of normalcy and continue their education amidst the upheaval.

Digital painting "Borders and Conflict-XIV" (2023) by Guita Hourani.

SZELMENC

Our next stop was Szelmenc, a poignant border crossing nestled between Slovakia and Ukraine in the Transcarpathian region. Known as the "Village Cut in Two," Szelmenc sits on the junction of two physical/state borders (Ukraine and Slovakia) and one cultural (Hungary). This historic town is home to people from Slovakia, Ukraine, and Hungary, its border history shaped by the whims of various superpowers.

With a rich history dating back to the 9th century, Szelmenc has witnessed the rise and fall of empires and kingdoms. Its division came after World War I, with the Austro-Hungarian Empire's dissolution and Hungary's reluctant acceptance of the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. Originally part of the Austro-Hungarian Kingdom of Hungary, Szelmenc found itself split between Czechoslovakia and Hungary after the war. Subsequent shifts in borders, including Soviet control over Hungary post-World War II, further divided the town between Czechoslovakia (now Slovakia) and the Soviet Union (now Ukraine). Today, the border is an EU frontier, marked by remnants of past barriers like the iron curtain and barbed wire fences.

Approaching Szelmenc, we were struck by vast farmlands and time-forgotten villages, eerily quiet and deserted. As we neared the Slovakian checkpoint, we were cautioned against taking photos, an atmosphere of discretion pervading the scene. Our Japanese colleagues, armed with their highly ranked passports, entertained hopes of crossing



Digital painting "Borders and Conflict-XV" (2023) by Guita Hourani.

into Ukraine. However, as a bearer of a Lebanese passport—one of the world's lowest ranking passports—I knew better than to attempt such a feat.

Despite Japan's passport ranking 2nd globally and offering visa-free access to 193 countries, only those with EU passports were permitted to cross. Consequently, our Bulgarian-Turkish and Hungarian colleagues undertook the task as our envoys to explore what lay beyond the checkpoints.

Carrying a low-ranking passport proved to be a constant challenge throughout my professional life. In 1983, amidst Lebanon's Civil War, luck granted me a visa to the US, but my brother's application was denied, leaving me burdened with guilt for what felt like depriving him of an opportunity.



Digital painting "Borders and Conflict-XVII" (2023) by Guita Hourani.

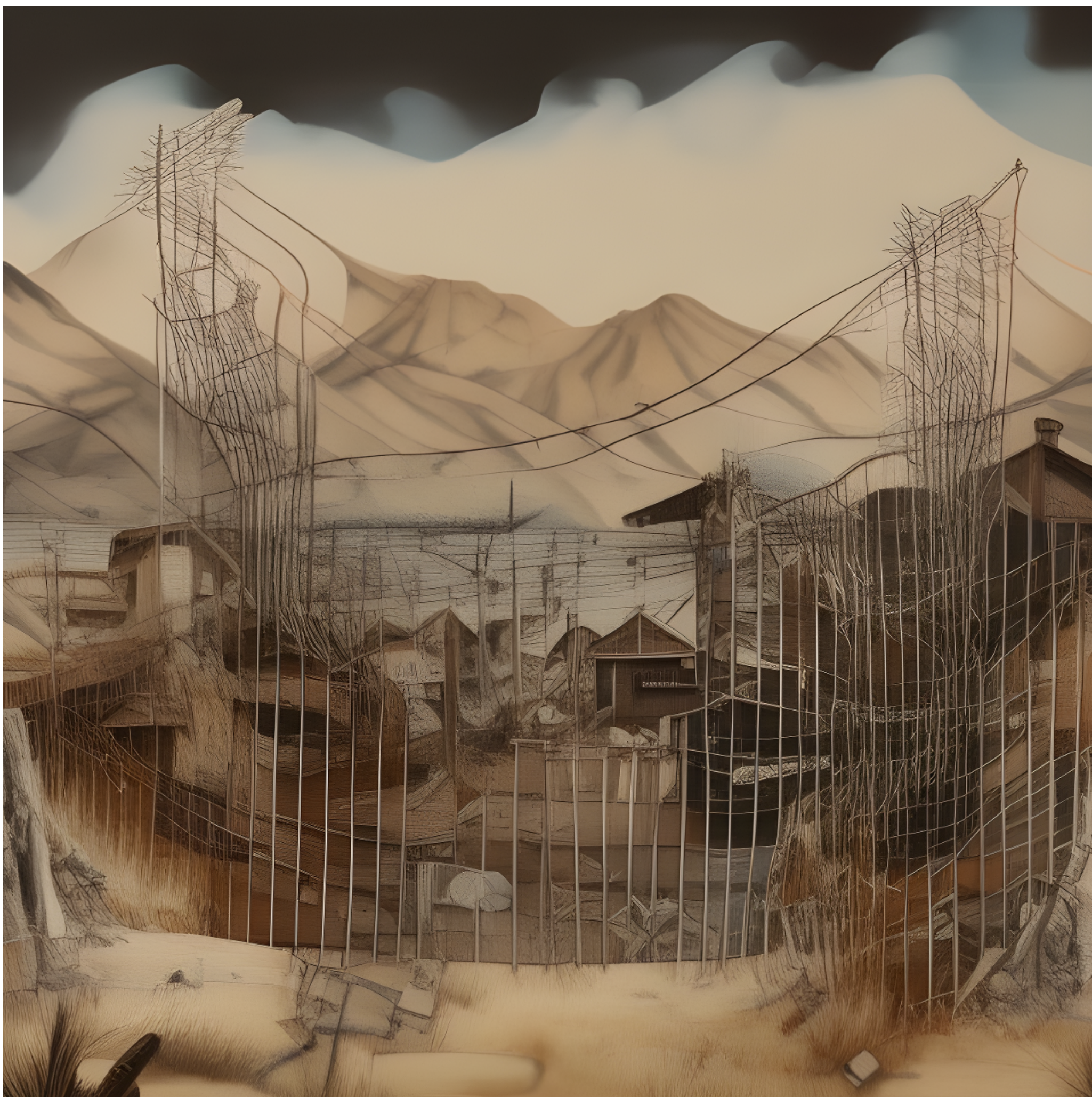
Memories flooded back of pre-dawn queues outside embassies and consulates, where Lebanese citizens, myself included, stood undignified, humiliated, and resentful, pleading for visas.

The Lebanese passport, light in weight but heavy in its implications, symbolized a life constrained by limitations and geopolitical circumstances. It served as a stark reminder of my restricted mobility and limited access to other countries compared to those with more privileged passports.

Standing at that border, frustration and injustice loomed large. It laid bare the stark reality of our unequal world, where nationality dictates opportunities and privileges. It was a sobering reminder of the broader issues of inequality and injustice that persist globally.

Thinking of the Ukrainian refugees navigating borders with their own passport limitations, compounded by the tragedy of fleeing their war-torn homeland, sparked a deep sense of sympathy within me. Their plight resonated, serving as a poignant reminder of the harsh realities faced by those forced to flee conflict and persecution.

Not wanting to dwell on my own circumstances while others faced even greater misfortune, I joined my Japanese and Hungarian colleagues, who were examining a section of a wooden Szekler-gate with great scrutiny.



Digital painting "The Gate of Separation-I" (2023) by Guita Hourani.

This gate, constructed by the people of Szelmenc, symbolically represents the town's division, with one half located on the Slovakian side and the other on the Ukrainian side. It was inaugurated on October 18, 2003,

as a testament to the town's fragmented unity. Intrigued by the inscription on the Slovakian side of the gate, Professor Osamu Ieda translated it, revealing a stanza attributed to Julianna Tóth, a resident of the Slovakian Szelmenc. It reads:



Digital painting "The Gate of Separation-II" (2023) by Guita Hourani.

"Aus einem wurden Szelmenc zwei, sollten vom Schöpfer vereint werden,
Gott segne mit Frieden und hält uns zusammen,
unsere Hoffnung bleibt und wird zusammenfügen,
was zerrissen ist, Torflügel der beiden Szelmec schließt unsere Dörfer
zusammen."

This translates to:

"By the grace of God, Szelmenc, which split into two, will be united.
May God grant us peace and keep our hope kindled.
We hope that what was once torn apart will be reunited.
Our villages are united by the Szelmenc gates' sight."

We heard stories of how families were suddenly split between two countries, unable to see or speak to each other for years. The residents of Szelmenc employed various creative methods to communicate across the border. Some drilled holes in potatoes and stuffed notes inside, tossing them over the barrier with news of deaths, marriages, or births. Others shouted in Hungarian, a language incomprehensible to the guards, ensuring their messages reached the other side. Car horns were used to signal presence, and pigeons were employed to carry messages across the divide.

Life at the borders was surreal then and remains strange now. When Slovakia joined the EU in 2004, Szelmenc's borders became part of the EU frontier, marking a new division between West and East. Ukrainians now need a Schengen visa to visit Slovakia, costing tens of euros—a significant expense for many. Meanwhile, Slovaks and Hungarians face customs regulations when shopping in Ukraine. This new customs border is referred to by some as the "new iron curtain" and by others as the "golden curtain." Regardless of the label, these arbitrarily drawn borders have witnessed countless human tragedies in Europe and beyond.

We visited these borders one year after the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We learned that few refugees were currently arriving through these crossings, but we could scarcely imagine the chaos during the initial exodus.



Digital painting "The Gate of Reunification-I" (2023) by Guita Hourani.

Our two colleagues returned from the Ukrainian side. Once on the bus, they recounted their adventure. They had expected the unexpected but found only a few shops and not many people; those crossing were on foot, and the atmosphere was eerily deserted. They brought back some Ukrainian goods, including cognac—a much-welcomed sedative after such heart-wrenching stories and overwhelming memories.

I took a seat at the rear end of the bus, sipping my cognac and gazing at the scenery, pondering the emotional and psychological stress that families on both sides of the border in Szelmenc experienced and how they coped with such a long and disturbing geopolitical history. Who is preserving the collective memories and lore now that the older generation is passing away? Who has recorded the genealogy and the kinship now that the elders have forgotten and the younger generation is migrating? Is it enough that some oral history was captured by filmmakers?

I also thought about how people often feel hopeful, adventurous, and dream of a better life when they decide to move. In contrast, when people are forced to leave, they feel that their very being is threatened, their identity undermined, anxious about the future, and fearful of what lies ahead. I wondered what the refugees felt as they left the last town in their home country before reaching the first town of their host country. How did they bid farewell to those towns where the surroundings were familiar, their coping mechanisms well-known, and their native tongue spoken, only to arrive in a place where everything is strange, coping mechanisms are unknown, and the language is foreign?

I resigned myself to the fact that forced migration has, unfortunately, long existed in the world, and that the human spirit is trained to hope, cope, and endure. I had overcome my own forced displacement and migration, my own border humiliations, my low-ranked passport... I drank the last drop of the cognac and whispered to myself, "Long live the spirit of resilience, no matter the cost."



TRANSCENDENT ART

As we journeyed into the heart of Kisvárdá, the tranquil melody of the Transcarpathian region enveloped us, weaving through the air like a whispered secret. In the embrace of the Carpathian House, a sanctuary unfolded before us—a sacred haven where the Hungarian community converged, bound by the intangible threads of a nation that defied the constraints of geography.

Amidst the hallowed halls of this cherished abode, my gaze was drawn to an exhibition of paintings that adorned the walls like windows into another realm. Each canvas breathed with vibrant life, as if the colors themselves danced in harmony to tell tales of distant lands and forgotten dreams. Intrigued by their allure, I yearned to unravel the mysteries concealed within their strokes and hues.

Inquisitive, I sought to learn more about the artist behind these captivating works. With eager anticipation, I discovered that they bore the signature of SOLTÉSZ Péter—a Carpathian painter whose compositions wove tales of his homeland with every stroke. Born amidst the verdant landscapes of western Ukraine in 1945, Soltész's artistry bore witness to the essence of the Carpathian spirit.

B

O

R

D



E

R

S

Fortune smiled upon me, for the paintings were not only on display but also available for purchase. Without hesitation, I selected one to carry with me on my journey back to Lebanon—a tangible memento of my encounter with the soulful beauty of Transcarpathia.

In the days that followed, I delved deeper into Soltész's repertoire, discovering the depth of his artistry and the profound connection he shared with the Carpathian landscape. Each stroke of his brush seemed to echo the vivid portraits of a land steeped in tradition and resilience.

As I reflected on my purchase, I realized that this painting held a significance far beyond mere aesthetics. Amid turmoil and conflict raging in Ukraine, it served as a poignant reminder of the enduring power of art to transcend borders and unite hearts in shared humanity. And so, it found its place not only on my wall but also in the depths of my soul—a testament to the indomitable human spirit in the face of adversity and an homage to the people of that part of the world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I extend my gratitude to Professor Osamu Ieda, Professor Norbert Pap, and Professor Hidemitsu Kuroki for providing the opportunity to participate in this field trip. I am also deeply indebted to Dr. Péter Balogh for reviewing and providing valuable comments on an earlier version of the narrative for this catalog.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Guita G. Hourani holds a Ph.D. from the Graduate School of Global Studies at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS), Japan. She is a consultant specializing in migration and citizenship and an expert on Lebanon as a country of origin information specialist. She is currently a Senior Research Affiliate with the Institute of Religion and Society at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, Ukraine, and with the Phoenix Center for Lebanese Studies at the Holy Spirit University in Kaslik, Lebanon.



Lebanon

2024

DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.26342296